

"I'm Bi-Winning": A Critical Content Analysis Of Bipolar
Disorder In American Newspapers

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“I’m Bi-Winning”: A Critical Content Analysis of Bipolar Disorder in American Newspapers

“I’m not bi-polar, I’m bi-winning. I win here and I win there” (“Charlie Sheen Says He’s Not Bipolar but Bi-Winning”). Charlie Sheen, former star of popular sitcom *Two and A Half Men*, became infamous for his inappropriate behavior on national television. He tarnished his reputation, lost his career, destroyed close relationships, and even revealed a history of drug dependency and substance abuse. As an “A-list” celebrity, entertainment news and tabloids were quick to narrow their focus on Sheen’s erratic behavior and highlight a celebrity gone “crazy.” However, the truth is that Charlie Sheen wasn’t going crazy; he was battling a major mental illness known as bipolar disorder.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) provides a working definition of bipolar disorder. Their website characterizes bipolar disorder as being a “manic-depressive illness” and a “brain disorder” that causes “unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks” (National Institute of Mental Health). Bipolar disorder is classified as a mental illness that typically manifests itself in a patient’s late teenage and early adult years, before the age of 25. According to the NIMH website, bipolar disorder is difficult to spot and diagnose when it starts. The article explains that “the symptoms may seem like separate problems,” and that they may not be “recognized as parts of a larger problem”. It is not uncommon for people to suffer for months or even years before their symptoms are recognized and properly diagnosed and treated. The article explains that “like diabetes or heart disease,” bipolar disorder is a “long-term illness that must be carefully managed throughout a person’s life” (National Institute of Mental Health). The disorder is composed of many symptoms, and

patients must be closely examined over a long period of time to determine if their symptoms' patterns are truly independent or if they are indeed interrelated.

Because of Charlie Sheen's status as a celebrity, his erratic behavior not only drew attention to bipolar disorder, but also aroused curiosity about mental illnesses in general. The attention, however, was not entirely positive. In a *Psychology Today* magazine article titled "Charlie Sheen: Wild Boy, Troubled Man," it explains, "It is also important that mainstream media understand that the way it chooses to report about Charlie Sheen can do one of two things. It can unwittingly create a contagious trend of demeaning mental illness or it can educate and help others receive treatment" (Serani 23). Rather than protecting Sheen during a period of time when the manic symptoms of his disorder took control of his life, the media exploited his illness for public entertainment. While it seems that Charlie Sheen brought bipolar disorder on the radar, the public seemed to attach all of his negative behavior to the illness, creating a very skewed image of what bipolar disorder actually is. In fact, the public found Sheen's manic behavior and language in an interview comedic, and proceeded to ridicule him. Instead of addressing the fact that a manic episode of bipolar disorder often creates a heightened sense of self-worth, the news focused instead on how entertaining and humorous Charlie Sheen's behavior was.

Just like the millions of American television viewers, I was exposed to Charlie Sheen's interviews and found myself entertained by his infamous quotes and erratic behavior. However, I kept in mind that bipolar disorder and its symptoms can be extremely dangerous, and it really isn't something to joke about. This caused me to think about the way that the media portrays mental illnesses in general, and I began to question the media's role in the creation of the negative stigma that society attaches to the mentally ill. Barbara Hocking's article "Reducing mental illness stigma and discrimination- everybody's business" discusses stigma. Hocking

writes that, “People with mental illness and their families said ‘less stigma’ was the number one thing that would make their lives better” (Hocking 47). She continues, “Stigma contributes to loneliness, distress and discrimination against people with a mental illness and their families” (Hocking 47). It is obvious that the negative stigma the public places on bipolar disorder is distressing for those with the disorder, and the impact it has on their lives is very troublesome. For the millions of bipolar Americans, stigma is a harsh reality and can have a negative effect on their lives. Charlie Sheen’s publicity from his bipolar meltdown is a prime example of how the mainstream media can demean bipolar disorder. Because of Charlie Sheen’s incident, I decided to further research the way that the media portrays mental illness, specifically focusing on its effect on bipolar disorder.

This paper will discuss and analyze the way that the media portrays mental illness with a narrowed focus on bipolar disorder. After looking at the preexisting literature about media’s social influence, and the way that mental illnesses are explored in the media, I will move into a content analysis of American newspapers on the topic of bipolar disorder to see how they frame mental illness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Across the decades, media has been a strong influence in mass communication. While it can sway public opinion, the media but can also lead to changes and evolutions in behavior. The term ‘media’ itself is a broad word that encompasses all forms of communication including magazine, newspaper, radio, television, and film, and the first point of mass communication I will discuss is the influence that media has on the public.

Through different media outlets including the television or printed press, the media plays a role in people’s lives on a daily basis. “The Portrayal of Public Relations in the News Media”

explores the influence of the news. Jo Samsup explains that the general public sees the world through the lens that the mass media presents to them. “Mass media plays a critical role in forming the meaning of any terminology. Thus, the media’s use of certain terms results in the construction of broad public meanings” (Samsup 397). This very important concept explains that the mass media can help the public create definitions of various societal terms.

While looking at the ways that the media has swayed public opinion in the past, politics certainly stand out. In an article titled *Manipulating Public Opinion: The Why and the How* by Edward L. Bernays, the author references the way that America made Lithuania more than just a spot on a map to our public. Bernays explains, “The printed word and events created to symbolize facts and ideas made America aware of the conditions in Lithuania and of its just aspirations. Ignorance was dissipated and sympathies strengthened to a point where these feelings became translated into action. Lithuania received economic aid and political recognition” (Bernays 967). The American newspapers presented information and facts about the topic of Lithuania and indirectly influenced the pathos within the American audience. As a result of this, Americans felt an emotional reaction towards this information and their opinions were swayed. This example particularly catches my attention because I want to see how strongly written words can influence public opinions. If political opinions are influenced, then surely other forms of opinions such as mental health are susceptible to change as well.

There is a longstanding history of the media influencing the way people think. Carnegie Mellon University professors David Kaufer and Kathleen Carely contrast the use of printed communication versus verbal communication in their article “Communication at a Distance: The Influence of Print on Sociocultural Organization and Change.” When discussing printed text, they explain, “Through its reproducibility and speed, print conferred to communication at a

distance an unprecedented socio-cultural presence, one that made it possible to maintain, through fast-circulating texts, various macro institutions of the society- government, corporate, professional and academic- beyond the bounds of spatial-temporal proximity” (Carley & Kaufer 8). This chilling idea suggests that the introduction of textual print becomes a socio-cultural presence that actually infuses information into our culture to help maintain and influence our nation. Research has proven that the media certainly influences socio-cultural ideas, and printed text has a particularly effective role as well. While the media can address any topic in society that they desire to, my interest lies within the field of health communication, which many communication scholars have explored. I wanted to get a feel for the type of research that exists on the influence that media has on human health topics.

A frequently occurring topic in the field of health communication seemed to be eating disorder development (Martinez-Gonzalez et al. 2003; Thompson & Heinberg 1999; Harrison 2000; Stice et al. 1994). The media has become a go-to resource that explicitly instructs our society on how to attain certain body types by way of diets, extreme exercise, and even surgery. This convinces many viewers, especially women, that they can fit these physical molds and should aspire to have a thin and lean body type. Professor Yuko Yamamiya and his colleagues wrote an article about the exposure women have to images in the media and how they internalize the messages conveyed. They explain, “In the United States, 94% of female characters in television programs are thinner than the average American woman, with whom the media frequently associate happiness, desirability, and success in life” (Yamamiya et al 75). This is an extremely large percentage of female characters that millions of American viewers are exposed to on a daily basis, including the message that these programs convey. This clearly demonstrates how the messages in the media influence both the beliefs and the behaviors of young women. If

eating disorders can arise from the influence of the media, we can infer that it can influence other opinions regarding health as well.

“Exposure to the Mass Media and Weight Concerns Among Girls” also attributes mass media to development of eating disorders. While explaining the eating and exercise behaviors that young women and men have, the article says, “The mass media have been implicated in the formation of unrealistically thin body ideals... These ecological studies have been used to support the position that the increase in weight concerns and eating disorders over time is caused at least partially by the unrealistic body weight and shapes portrayed by the mass media” (Cheung et al. 2). The exposure to unrealistic images and messages in the media is a certainly a factor in many individuals developing idealistic self body images which ultimately translate into eating disorders.

Another area of health communication that has been specifically investigated is mental illness. Throughout my research, a bulk of material was focused on mental illness as a broad term, meaning there was no particular focus on any one illness, but rather on all mental illnesses grouped under one umbrella. A common finding was that mental illnesses have a negative stigma attached to them (Penn & Martin 2002; River 2010; Kim & Stout 2002; Corrigan 2000; Penn & Couture 2010).

Patrick Corrigan’s article “The Impact of Stigma on Severe Mental Illness” explains the three main assessments of attitude used in stigma research include perceived dangerousness of people with mental illness, desired social distance from people with mental illness, and perceived severity of the mental illness (Corrigan 201). These three elements are important in understanding what defines stigmatic attitudes towards the mentally ill. To elaborate on the stigmatic development and understanding, I found the article “Social Psychological Models of

Mental Illness Stigma” that discusses how mental illness stigma fits perfectly into the ‘holy trinity’ of psychology, possessing a cognitive, affective, and behavioral component

“This cognitive representation, which is often a socially shared one, depicts individuals with mental illness as possessing certain traits (e.g., ‘bizarre’) or engaging in certain behaviors (e.g., talking to oneself). In contrast, prejudice against persons with mental illness refers to a negative affective reaction, evaluation, or attitude toward this group of people. Completing the trinity, discrimination refers to negative behaviors or actions directed toward people with mental illness (e.g., refusing to hire a person with mental illness). (Ottati, Bodenhausen, and Newman 100)

The completion of the psychology ‘holy trinity’ through stigma is an important concept because it demonstrates that stigma is not only a cognitive idea that the public holds, but it also has an affective and behavioral component that makes the public act on their cognitive beliefs. Herein lies the serious issue of stigmatizing mental illness, because it is not just a stereotype, and can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

While mental illness is a severe health issue, society views it as an entirely different entity than physical illness, and treats both as if they were completely separate issues. In “The Effects of Interactivity on Information Processing and Attitude Change: Implications for Mental Health Stigma,” Hyojin Kim and Patricia Stout explain, “Cultural conceptions of people with mental illness reflect the public’s less sympathetic attitudes toward people with mental illness and the perception that mental illness is less severe than physical illness” (Kim & Stout 144). With these attitudes, it seems extremely difficult to encourage a change in the negative stigma.

Kim and Stout have recommended three main ways to change societal attitude towards the mentally ill: education, contact, and protest. With education, people are better informed on various types of mental illness and will not believe all the incorrect information they are exposed to. Contact is another important method of changing behavior because it allows the opportunity for people to directly interact with those who suffer from mental illnesses and change any

preexisting ideas they may have held about the mentally ill. Finally, protest exists as a recommendation for a more social movement approach, and is a method in which society could create change by speaking out against the stigma.

While exploring the ways that the media portrays mental illness, I came across the newspaper article “Mental Illness and Stigma in the News Media.” The article says, “The media has considerable influence on shaping public opinion. Negative depictions of mental illness in the media can play a role in perpetuating misinformation” (Mental Health Weekly Digest). The story continues that it is a “tendency for some of the news media to associate mental illness with violence, crime and homelessness” (Mental Health Weekly Digest). This sample that spans six years is a very good indicator of the media trends regarding mental illnesses. We know that the media has a general pull on public opinion, so the negative portrayal of mental illness can begin forming negative opinions on individuals with mental illnesses.

In Health correspondent Sophie Blakemore’s article “Charities challenge stigmatizing views of depression in the media; negative coverage can undermine positive initiative to improve understanding of mental illness” Blakemore discusses, “Media coverage on mental illness is incredibly powerful. At its best, it can help challenge stigma, and at its worst, it can reinforce it” (Mental Health Practice). This brings up an important point — with the media’s knowledge that they have such a strong influence on society and culture, there is a large responsibility in utilizing such power for either good or bad. The media has a choice of how they will frame mental illness, and this decision can have an indirect impact on the lives of those with mental illnesses.

I wasn’t able to find many articles focused specifically on bipolar disorder while conducting my background research, and I feel that this can be attributed to the notion that it is a

challenge to display and discuss this illness in the media. Bipolar disorder affects people in different ways and there are varying types of the disorder on the intensity spectrum. According to “The Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide,” defining and diagnosing Bipolar Disorder is one of the most challenging in the realm of mental illnesses. The symptoms must be observed over a long period of time and even after a proper diagnosis, explaining the disorder still proves to be difficult. Dr. David Miklowitz explains, “No diagnostic label can completely capture your unique situation. In fact you may feel offended by the diagnostic label because it is incomplete, impersonal, or simply doesn’t do justice to your life experiences” (Miklowitz 30). There are so many different ways that each patient experiences the illness and each person has their own unique treatment plan. There is no cookie-cutter formula to diagnose bipolar patients. It is possible that many movies and television programs avoid exploring bipolar disorder because the experience is so hard to standardize. I took an interest to this unique feature of bipolar disorder in the media, leading me to search for existing media about the illness. It was surprising to find that overall there was not much media discussion on bipolar disorder, but there were a significant number of newspaper articles to delve into.

Before examining the newspaper articles, there are several hypotheses I have. I expect to find that the articles in the newspapers will frame bipolar disorder in such a way as to convey a societal stigma attached to this mental illness. The stigma will be a result of misinformation and a negative interpretation of the treatment, conditions, and patients with bipolar disorder. I also expect to find a majority of articles looking at case studies of crimes involving manic/depressive episodes of bipolar patients.

METHOD

In order to investigate the way that the media frames bipolar disorder, I narrowed my focus onto only American newspapers. One of the longstanding forms of media is by way of newspapers. The newspapers have been a source of spreading information to the masses since the invention of the printing press, and remains one of the country's major media outlets. I have taken a particular interest in newspaper media because it is far easier to reach a vast demographic spread of citizens where Internet and television are not as accessible. University of California, San Diego professor Michael Schudson discusses societal newspaper influence in his book *The Sociology of News*. "None of this [newspapers] would be of great interest if the news did not build a world that people took seriously or if the news did not affect how people act. The conviction that news influences human action undergirds nearly all studies of news" (Schudson 6). The simple fact is that studies have proven countless times that newspapers do indeed affect how people behave, so I decided to keep this as my main medium of communication during my research.

I accessed the Cal Poly article database and used the Lexis Nexis academic database. I searched the key phrase "bipolar disorder" and after obtaining results I selected "newspapers" as the source type. My search yielded 841 newspaper articles in total. The newspaper selection sorted articles by the newspaper type, so I selected the following American newspapers and read their articles on the topic of bipolar disorder: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Daily News*, *The Washington Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*. All the articles were about bipolar disorder, but they had various angles of focus. Of the major American newspapers, there were 112 articles, and I selected to read 80 articles to have a sufficient base of information to analyze. I wanted to make sure I covered more than half of the articles available so reading 80

put me at just a little over 70% of articles covered. My article selection was based on choosing the first 10 of each newspaper, and then rotating through the rest of the articles by choosing the next article in each newspaper category until I reached 80. This was my way of keeping the sample as random as possible.

After reading through 80 articles, I went back and re-read through all of the articles a second time, taking notes on the angle of focus each article had. I found that a majority of the articles discussed medication. There were several articles about what Bipolar Disorder is and how to diagnose it, along with several articles that featured case studies of people who have the illness. However, the overwhelming amount of the articles focused on medication. These articles ranged in discussing the necessity, dangers, and importance of taking medication for bipolar disorder treatment.

ANALYSIS

After reading 80 newspaper articles about bipolar disorder, I found the main focus to be about medication as a form of treatment. There are several subcategories under this medication topic, including off-label medication use, prescribing medication to children, and case studies about the misuse or failure of bipolar medication. To get a better feel for these articles, I have compiled article references illuminating the various emphases on medication use.

One of the major subcategories under medication use is about the issue of prescribing “off-label” medication to patients. A common practice among psychiatrists is using “off-label” medication, meaning a medication intended for a particular illness, is prescribed for another illness that it was not originally created for. To better understand this concept we can examine a frequently administered bipolar medication called Seroquel. In the USA Today article “Study: Off-label drugs should be researched for safety,” they list 14 drugs that are routinely used off-

label, and Seroquel tops the chart. The author explains, “Seroquel, an antipsychotic approved for treating schizophrenia and short-term manic or depressive episodes in bipolar disorder, topped the list. Three out of four times, doctors use the drug off-label, mainly for maintenance therapy for bipolar disease” (Rubin 1). According to their chart, Seroquel is a schizophrenic medicine, and approved for short-term use with manic or depressive episodes. However, many psychiatrists prescribe this medicine for long-term maintenance for bipolar disorder.

Numerous articles focused on this practice with bipolar patients, questioning the safety and effectiveness of prescribing medication that merely seems to have an effect. The key component of off-label use is that some patients show positive results, but there isn’t enough laboratory research and results to prove the effectiveness and safety of the medication. There were a slew of articles discussing off-label medication hazards, specifically the fact that the medication has not been tested or approved by federal regulation. The next block of article sources are examples of some that discuss this psychiatric practice.

USA Today: “Among all the drugs prescribed to treat conditions for which they’re not approved, doctors and patients should be most concerned about antipsychotics and antidepressants. This ‘off-label’ prescribing is a legal, common practice that is being questioned in some cases because of inadequate scientific evidence to support its safety and effectiveness. Three out of four times, doctors use the drug off-label, mainly for maintenance therapy for bipolar disease.” (Rubin 12)

USA Today: “With varying degrees of enthusiasm, a Food and Drug Administration advisory committee Wednesday concluded that three newer antipsychotic drugs already widely used ‘off-label’ in children and teens are acceptably safe and effective in treating them for schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Because of the risks involved with the drugs, however – mainly weight gain, sleepiness and increases in blood fats and sugars – several panel members expressed concerns about their inappropriate use in pediatric patients who don’t have schizophrenia or bipolar disorder or are younger than the age range studied.” (Rubin 7)

The New York Times: “The issue of off-label marketing is controversial in the drug industry. Nearly every company is under either civil or criminal investigation for

alleged efforts to expand the use of its drugs beyond the specific illness or condition for which they are approved.” (Berenson 12)

The use of off-label medication is an area of great concern in the pharmaceutical industry. The lack of certainty with the benefits and long-term effects of the medication use leave many experts hesitant about supporting the use of off-label drugs. A majority of newspaper articles explain that off-label prescription drugs are a routine part of treating bipolar disorder. However, they also present this practice as dangerous with side effects that can be major health hazards such as weight gain, imbalanced fat and sugar blood levels, and even sedation. Several articles even discussed the legal cases in which pharmaceutical companies were being sued or investigated for improperly marketing their medication for various uses. These articles about off-label medication use make it seem like a hopeless situation for bipolar patients. On one hand, they are following doctor’s orders and taking off-label medication as a part of treatment plans. But on the other hand, they are running a large risk with their health since the true impact of the off-label medication hasn’t been researched.

The articles I have shared so far focus on off-label medication for adults. The topic of off-label drugs continued into the articles about prescribing children with medication for treatment. In fact, most of the articles dealing with medication are connected to prescribing medication to children. There is a great deal of concern with the use of the adult medication with children because an adult’s body and brain are much different in comparison to the developing child. I have gathered a sample of articles that focus on children and medication.

New York Times: “The rising rates of diagnosis and medication use strike some doctors and advocates for patients as a dangerous fad that exposes ever-younger children to powerful drugs. Antipsychotics like Seroquel or Risperdal, which are commonly prescribed for bipolar disorder, can cause weight gain changes in blood sugar – risk factors for diabetes.” (Carey 20)

New York Times: “The trendy diagnosis of the moment for children, we’re told, is bipolar disorder, that drastic series of shifts in mood and energy once thought to be an adults-only problem. And rather than giving troubled children relatively familiar antidepressants, there is a corresponding move toward treating them with less predictable, less thoroughly studied antipsychotic drugs. We’ve take a drug that has very limited risk and replaced these drugs, often with a class of drugs that have unknown efficacy but quite well-known risks.” (Genzlinger 6)

USA Today: “A FDA advisory committee will vote today on whether the makers of three blockbuster antipsychotic drugs – already widely prescribed ‘off label’ to children and teens – should be allowed to market them to treat schizophrenia and bipolar disorder in young people.... After listening to FDA staffers and drug company representatives, panel members heart testimony from the public. Virtually all agreed that more research is needed into the drugs’ long-term safety and effectiveness in children and teens.” (Rubin 5)

The Washington Times: “Doctors have been prescribing Risperdal to children on an off-label basis for years, meaning the medication was not federally approved for children but physicians felt it was the best available treatment option. To this point, physicians have not had much guidance in prescribing the drug to these younger populations.” (Lopes 8)

It is clear that administering off-label medication to children is a touchy subject in the psychiatric treatment of bipolar disorder. There hasn’t been enough research testing the long-term impact of adult medication given to young children, especially with the off-label medication. Off-label medication impact hasn’t been tested on adults, let alone on children. The newspaper articles have also framed the bipolar diagnosis for children as a trendy new fad, leading to misdiagnoses. There is an underlying message when the newspaper articles frame a child’s diagnosis as a fad, suggesting that doctors are following trends, and that children may not actually have bipolar disorder.

The final subcategory of medication articles were case studies that reported on stories involving bipolar patients, often resulting with death or hospitalization. At the core of these articles, the patients were not using their medication, or misusing their prescriptions. Once again, I selected several articles that exemplify the trend of tying the articles back to medication use.

The New York Times: “The doctor does not cut me off, so I add: “His liver is also shot, but that’s not because of the drinking only. It’s because he really tried to beat the bipolar illness and faithfully took his lithium.” (Von Stamwitz 14)

The New York Times: “Eli Lilly has agreed to pay \$62 million to 33 states to settle claims that it improperly marketed Zyprexa, its top-selling drug, to patients who did not have schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, its only approved uses.” (Berenson 14)

The New York Times: “He’s never had an issue like this when he’s been on his medication. So common sense tells you he’s not on his medication. Robbery doesn’t even make sense. Pittman also said he believes that Robbins, who played nine N.F.L. seasons, all for the Raiders, was off his medication when he was arrested on Dec. 24 in San Francisco on batter and drunk and disorderly conduct charges.” (Nobles 14)

Daily News: “Reputed mobster and John Gotti son-in-law Carmine Agnello is a pill-popping mess suffering from mental illness, according to defense papers obtained by the Daily News. Mob watchers say a letter from Agnello’s attorneys to Judge Nina Gershon sets the stage for him to blame bipolar disorder, and drugs used to treat it, for alleged crimes of extortion, arson and tax fraud.” (Fenner 14)

These case study articles are a good blend of the many type of stories that are connected to bipolar disorder. We see cases ranging from patient death from the harsh impact of long-term medication use, pharmaceutical company marketing issues and even crimes that occur due to improper medication use. The overall trend of these case-study articles carries negative connotations, placing medication under a negative light.

A large number of newspaper articles on the topic of bipolar disorder focus on the use of medication. It seems that bipolar disorder and medication use are intertwined. The medication is presented as the main form of treatment, with no alternative options. There were two main subcategories of medication articles with one emphasizing off-label medication use and the other about prescribing adult medication to children. The newspaper articles imply that medication is very necessary, yet the bipolar medication tends to be prescribed off-label too often and adult medication is given to children as well. The long-term impacts and side effects from the medication are not clear, so the use of medication seems to be negative yet inevitable based on

the newspaper articles. Even with the small subcategory of case study articles, they discuss how many crimes, deaths, or manic episodes are directly connected to medication use, or misuse.

DISCUSSION

After examining 80 articles about Bipolar Disorder and observing the topic and intent of the articles, I have a better understanding of the trend of articles that the American newspapers use when discussing this mental illness. The main focus of these articles is the use of medication. These medication articles were broken into three categories of off-label medication use, prescribing medication to children, and bipolar disorder case studies.

It was very surprising to find that the majority of the newspaper articles discussed medication and treatment. I hypothesized that articles would mainly have case studies about crimes or individuals who have the disorder, creating a negative stigma of bipolar disorder. Rather than creating a negative image, there was a tendency to discuss medication and the pros/cons of it. To gain a better sense of the newspaper articles about medication I will dissect several main points about medication.

As I touched on in the analysis section, the use of off-label medication is a controversial topic within bipolar treatment options. The long-term impact of off-label medication is still unknown but nonetheless they are still prescribed as a primary form of treatment for adults. The issues with the medication use continue into the articles involving children. The risks associated with children's medicinal use are even greater. Finally, there are a slew of articles that explore case studies involving bipolar patients and their stories are directly tied to improper medication use or the results of long-term medication usage.

It was surprising to find that the articles did not convey a sense of stigma that I expected them to have. The focus of the articles was on the medical aspect of the disorder, specifically

with treatment. The part of the analysis I found most interesting was the segment on medication for children. Many articles seem to imply that diagnosing children with bipolar disorder has become the “new thing”. This stance is attached only to diagnosis of children however, not adult diagnosis. That viewpoint allows the public to make potential assumptions. First and foremost, if the bipolar diagnosis for children is trendy, then people may question if children really have bipolar disorder, while an adult diagnosis is not questioned. Another important factor connected with the way these articles are framed is that they in a sense undermine the authority that doctors have. The position of trendy diagnoses begins to imply that we will not believe parents when they say that their children have bipolar disorder. It also makes doctors seem unethical with following diagnosis trends, when the reality is that there are only a handful of doctors that align with this practice.

Rather than publishing articles that negatively frame bipolar disorder, it would be better if the tone of the articles were changed in order to portray bipolar disorder in a more positive light. Out of the 80 articles that I read, there were only 9 articles that illuminated the positive aspects of the illness—such as creativity—that manic episodes bring, and that offer treatment options as an alternative to medication. I have provided excerpts from these few newspaper articles that remove the stigma attached to bipolar disorder and discuss the illness in a more positive light.

The New York Times: “Psychiatrists have known for more than a century that bipolar disorder, unlike any other mental illness, is often associated with some financial and professional accomplishment. Mania can inspire destructive shopping or gambling sprees, but it can also generate bursts of creative and focused work.” (Carey 15)

Daily News: “The problem is that a lot of these medications belong to the same families of chemicals and work in relatively similar ways. So while they’re incredibly helpful for many people, they are ineffective for a minority of our patients. Psychotherapies seek to improve the patient’s sense of well-being and provide tools for overcoming problems. For instance, cognitive behavioral therapy focuses on the

abnormal thinking patterns that patients develop and helps them recognize and correct their distorted perceptions.” (Charles 15)

The New York Times: “Ms. Dennard, 56, who loves to sew and crochet and has battled bipolar disorder for the better part of her life, does not miss the low points. But she does miss the high ones. When she channeled her elevated moods into her work, she produced scarves and hats by the armful.” (Fairbanks 15)

The New York Times: “Gartner took on early American political leaders like Alexander Hamilton, William Penn and Roger Williams, showing how they benefited from mild and not so mild forms of mania... Ronald R. Fieve, a professor of clinical psychiatry and a pioneering authority on bipolar illness, discussed positive aspects of the disorder, citing examples among the Kennedys as well as Lincoln and Churchill.” (Tydings 6)

After reading these articles, I realized that the newspapers could play a large role in reducing stigma attached to bipolar disorder. It is important to include case studies and stories that demonstrate the potential and productive lifestyle that individuals with bipolar disorder are completely capable of. The creativity connected with mania is often overlooked, but these example articles show how even iconic figures who accomplished great things were suspected of having bipolar disorder. Additionally, the discussion of alternative treatment options provides a relief from all of the articles that feature medicine as the primary solution to treating bipolar disorder, and some of the options mentioned that did not involve medication bring hope to the many patients for whom medication does not work.

After thoroughly analyzing the literature and the research I conducted, I realized there were certain limitations to my study. It is difficult to make a generalization about bipolar disorder media as a whole because I focused solely on American newspapers. In a future content analysis, I would like to see someone explore various forms of media and collaborate their findings in order to form more cohesive results. Another area I would like to improve with this study is the generalization of the newspaper samples used. Although I tried to keep my samples consistent by selecting the first ten articles of each American newspaper I used, a better randomization system

can yield an even stronger representative sample of the articles. It would also be useful to have a methodical coding system for sorting the newspaper articles. While I attempted to remain as neutral as possible, I may have been subjective with selecting the key focus of each article. Many articles developed multiple key points on bipolar disorder, and there was a degree of bias when I selected which topic was the dominant one.

In a future study, it would be beneficial for someone to continue with my content analysis and actually measure the effect that these articles on readers. My study merely analyzed the content of the newspaper articles, but there is great value in actually measuring the influence that these articles have on readers and whether they contribute to bipolar disorder stigma.

CONCLUSION

The mass media is a channel of communication that highly influences society. In our American society, newspapers have been a longstanding form of mass communication capable of swaying public opinion, and delivering messages from author to readers. In the field of health communication, there are many studies proving the influence that media has on societal ideas about various health topics, including mental illnesses.

Bipolar disorder is a type of mental illness rather untouched in the media. There is, however, a significant amount of newspaper articles about bipolar disorder. A content analysis of 80 articles yielded interesting results. While the bulk of articles had a negative medicinal and case study focus, a handful shifted away from this and modeled a style of positive writing that softens associations with bipolar disorder. They discussed alternative treatment options and even highlighted the positive side of bipolar disorder (such as the productivity and creativity connected to manic episodes). These types of articles have the potential to reduce mental illness stigma.

Newspapers should put forth an effort to publish articles that focus on the alternative forms of treatment and the positive aspects of bipolar disorder. Living with a major mental illness already isolates those individuals, so it would be significantly helpful to have the mass media spread positive messages on the topic of mental illness.

In conclusion, the mass media plays a socio-cultural role in American society. If writers take the time to publish positive messages about mental illnesses, then it will be a step forward that can help not only bipolar patients, but the mental illness community as a whole. Little by little, various angles of media can project positive messages. Hopefully, in future televised cases such as Charlie Sheen's, the public will sympathize with the sufferer instead of portraying them as a caricature of their illness.

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